

8th Grade, 8th Period

Teddy twitches in his seat, his pivoting head a wheel's center and the beams of his shifting glance its spokes. His smile, constant and uneraseable, seems to say "What can I do get attention?" and seems to say "Why's everyone looking at me?"

Alex doodles madly whenever he has paper out. He's already read so many better books. Sometimes he curses mildly, under his breath, at the imbecility and truculence (words he could use) of classmates madly baiting me. He can go for weeks without doing homework.

Jordan wears his baseball cap, snapped too tight for his head, perched upon the peak of his skull, its visor roofing one ear. The effect is vaudeville clown. He has a square jaw and full round darting eyes. He has nervous fingers dancing on his desktop – searching for a pen, paper, the assignment. He talks with Samantha from the corner of his fleshy lips. Once he raised his hand to ask what I meant by "your opinion."

Angela has her notebook out when I walk in the room. She knows what we did yesterday and will willingly do more today. She is willow thin and oak erect, all tan and sunshine hair. She is striving, striving, thoughtful and sincere. She *won't* be like her brother and, in her journal, she writes about vacations in Wisconsin with her dad.

Daniella asks, "Am I a nerd? Some kids say that I'm a nerd." She writes down her assignments, keeps up with reading, laughs at Scott, can't spell, can't punctuate, can't elaborate. "A nerd," I say later, alone, "Is a kid who can't have fun in or out of class." She raises great round eyes, confused and slightly sideways towards me, until, when I explain some more, she tosses back her short black hair, smiles and says, "I'm*not* a nerd."

Samantha shimmers and pronounces. Samantha shrieks and gasps and flounces. She wants to read from her journal to see if her answer's best, she wants me to stop talking with Truman to check the sentence she's just written, she wants to change the subject, she wants to curse McClaren, she wants to yell "You're mean to call me fat!" She wants to put her foot in Jordan's lap.

Truman loses his work. Every due date surprises him. He is a tousled puppy, always amazed and slightly panting, but he is silent, silent. Every question is yes or no. He wants me to meet his mother, who tells me, "Truman's dad and I are just now working out our self-esteem difficulties. We understand Truman's need in this period of identity formation."

Eleanor, hands flat on the desk and cheek on flattened knuckles, gazes out the window. She is cool and lovely, hopelessly confused, achingly aloof, and her smile could bring sunshine from tree limbs and lawn to the classmates who ignore her.

- Del Shortliffe